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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 004932

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TAGS: PREL PGOV BG IN

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH HIGH COMMISSION REFUTES MEA CLAIMS
REGARDING "FRIENDSHIP TRAIN"

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Bangladesh Political Minister in Delhi dismissed as untrue Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) claims that Bangladesh is unwilling to ensure security of the "Friendship Train" operations. She asserted that the two sides continue to search for a mutually acceptable solution that would preserve the intent of the project as a confidence building measure. The Minister confirmed that three Bangladeshi criminals were handed over to Dhaka by India with more in the pipeline and cited the deportation as proof that bilateral engagement on cross-border terror and crime was beginning to bear fruit. She disputed Indian media reports that Bangladesh had rejected a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) that India proposed at the October SAARC ministerial in New Delhi, claiming that her government wanted to review the document and offer changes before signing the agreement. Her views are so positive as to be at sharp variance with official Indian unhappiness with relations with Dhaka. In contrast, MEA Joint Secretary Tirumurti was subdued in tone when discussing the state of Indo-Bangladesh relations. END SUMMARY.

----- Border cage around "Friendship Train" dampens CBMs message -----

¶2. (C) In a November 1 meeting, Bangladesh High Commission Political Minister Mashfee Binte Shams told Poloff that Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh Pinak Chakrabarty's statement to the press that, "The Bangladesh government is apparently not willing to help ensure security," is inaccurate. While the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) understands the GOI's border security concerns, India's current proposal to erect a security fence enclosing the passenger train for 1.5 kilometers from the border into Indian territory does not remedy the broader problem, Shams contended. "What kind of a message are we sending if a Friendship Train, whose primary objective is to promote people-to-people exchanges as a confidence building measure, is encompassed by a solid fence?" she mused. Observing that no extended fence exists for the passenger rail between India and Lahore, Shams asked wryly, "Does this mean India deems us to be more threatening than Pakistan?" She said the fence proposal is emblematic of India's attitude toward Bangladesh and provided anti-Indian elements within Bangladesh with leverage. Shams emphasized that rail security discussions were ongoing, with the GOB endeavoring to implement more creative solutions that preserve the intent of the project. Possible solutions include more rigorous patrolling on both sides of the track and enhanced security on board the trains, she posited. Venting about the negative coverage of the Indian press, Shams disclosed that new coverage failed to report that the GOI presented a modified drawing within the past few days that included a mesh fence rather than a solid

tunnel-like structure, and the GOB was considering the proposal.

----- Positive movement on cross-border crime and terror -----

¶3. (C) Focusing on recent bilateral engagement regarding cross-border crime and terror, Shams confirmed India media reports that the GOI recently handed over three criminals wanted in Bangladesh and confirmed that they were on the list of 1,590 wanted criminals recently submitted to the GOI for capture and deportation. In response to queries regarding media reports that the GOI is pressuring the GOB to clamp down on 140 Indian rebel camps operating inside Bangladesh, Shams claimed that MEA had recently told the Bangladeshi High Commissioner in New Delhi that the GOI was satisfied with recent GOB efforts against cross-border terrorist and criminal elements. She reported that the GOB intended to continue its counter terror efforts, but remarked that goodwill gestures on the part of India would provide the Caretaker Government (CTG) with the "political wiggle room" necessary to combat cross border terror more vigorously. Shams suggested that Indian concessions on the Teesta River negotiations, which have floundered since 1997, and the adverse possession and enclave issues would neutralize anti-Indian segments of Bangladeshi society and free the CTG from domestic political considerations when moving against groups inimical to India. She highlighted the Home Minister bilateral meeting in August, recent meetings at the Home Minister-level at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in New Delhi on October 24-25, and meetings of the Bangladeshi Rifles (BDR) and India's Border Security Force (BSF) as illustrative of the intensified constructive engagement regarding security issues.

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----- SAARC will turn its attention to Bangladesh's role in "connectivity" soon -----

¶4. (C) Shams foreshadowed that Bangladesh's potential role in contributing to the 2007 SAARC Summit's theme of connectivity among member states would become a focal point for the organization in the coming year, noting that Bangladesh territory was an element in six of the eight connectivity routes being discussed by SAARC at the October ministerial. Although she did not expound on the connectivity issue in detail, she relayed that the proposals involved posed "infrastructure and geographical challenges to us which are as difficult as the political hurdles." Turning to the SAARC Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) initiated by the GOI, Shams disputed Indian press reports that Bangladesh rejected the proposal. She stated that Bangladesh favored the SAARC MLAT in principle but needed more time to study and digest the agreement. She confirmed that Bangladesh will submit a counter draft of the MLAT to SAARC by January.

----- GOB's readout of India's Bangladesh policymakers -----

¶5. (C) Speaking in confidence, Shams lamented that some MEA officials made bilateral relations more difficult than others. In particular, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's historical background on Bangladesh issues "bound him to preconceived notions of present day realities that are not always beneficial to the relationship." She declined to provide specifics, but revealed previous Joint Secretary (Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, Maldives) Mohan Kumar's "forward-looking and energized approach" to the bilateral relationship was sorely missed, particularly when contrasted with the apparent closed-door policy of his successor, T.S. Tirumurti, who has refused numerous requests for meetings from the diplomatic community in the wake of events in Burma.

----- MEA seeks to create momentum on cross-border criminal/terror issue -----

¶6. (C) Joint Secretary Tirumurti told PolCouns on November 6 that the GOI's handover of three criminals to Bangladeshi authorities was a goodwill gesture designed to get create momentum on the stalled cross border criminal and terrorist issue. (NOTE: GOB recently submitted a note for the deportation of 1,590 prisoners. The three criminals returned were included in the list. END NOTE.) In summing up the GOI's impetus for the delivery of the criminals, he said that the two sides had "talked about the issues and exchanged documents for too long, and we have to actually start the process somewhere." Tirumurti was pleased when the PolCouns summarized Shams' assessment of the current state of the Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. Tirumurti did not reply to PolCouns' inquiry regarding the Friendship Train but said that he would obtain an update from his staff and inform PolCouns accordingly.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The Bangladesh High Commission's perception of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations is considerably more positive than the Indian media's portayal. It is clear from Shams' characterization that, while the two sides continue to negotiate acceptable security measures for the Friendship Train, operationalization of the passenger rail service is not imminent. In addition, Shams' assessment of the GOI's satisfaction with GOB efforts to thwart cross border terrorism and neutralize base camps of groups with interests inimical to India is in sharp contrast with past MEA statements of frustration regarding concrete action on the part of the GOB. Tirumurt, who has been consumed by Burma's problems since assuming his new portfolio, has little to offer on the state of Indo-Bangladesh relations, but recent public comments by the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh indicate that the GOI remains concerned with the GOB's commitment to cross-border terror and crime. END COMMENT.

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